

WORKING DOCUMENT ON SHARED GOVERNANCE
TRINITY COLLEGE
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In spring 2018, a group of four trustees (referred to as the trustee working group) met with more than 70 members of the faculty and staff in small focus groups to listen to people's perceptions about shared governance at Trinity College. The aim of the focus groups was to provide trustees with a better understanding of whether there is a consensus and clarity about the roles of trustees, the administration, and members of the faculty and staff in governance processes; whether shared governance at Trinity is perceived as effective; and if it is not, how it could be improved.

The trustee working group summarized its findings separately for members of the faculty and staff, and these findings were shared with the respective groups. The working group noted that all groups interviewed shared a deep love for the Trinity community and support for its educational mission. However, there was little consensus about what shared governance means, how it should be practiced at Trinity, and/or the appropriate roles of different constituents in the governance process. Though the views shared in this document are my own, to model shared governance, I have shared this document and discussed its content with Cornie Thornburgh, chair of the Board of Trustees, and Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre, secretary of the faculty.

Before providing my suggestions about moving forward, I will use this document to provide my unequivocal support, as well as that of Ms. Thornburgh and Professor Regan-Lefebvre, for the concept of shared governance at Trinity College. Shared governance should be a system for deliberation, building trust, and collaboration among constituents and accepting shared responsibility for our collective mission. Shared governance is not equivalent to shared decision-making; rather, it is an opportunity to exercise distributed leadership across the organization. The ultimate goal of this document, and more importantly the process that ensues, is for constituent groups to work together to help this extraordinary college function better.

What Is Shared Governance?

Shared governance in higher education is a term used frequently but whose meaning is not always agreed upon. Here are some widely held and classic views about shared governance:

[It] is a delicate balance between faculty and staff participation in planning and decision-making processes, on the one hand, and administrative accountability on the other. ... "Shared" means that everyone has a role ... [it] doesn't mean that every constituency gets to participate at every stage [of a decision].¹

¹ A classic article by Gary Olson. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Exactly-What-Is-Shared/47065>

Traditionally, shared governance meant a tripartite of divided authority: the board controlling the long-term health and finances of the institution, the senior administration controlling day-to-day operations and budgets, and the faculty controlling the curriculum and the core academic experience.

As the “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities”—a joint statement of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), American Council on Education (ACE), and Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) from 1966—reminds us, “a college or university in which all of the components are aware of their interdependence, of the usefulness of communication among themselves, and of the force of joint action will enjoy increased capacity to solve educational problems.”² In a more recent report, the Commission of the Future of Undergraduate Education of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences calls for a new level of engagement and commitment to shared interests:

Colleges and universities of all types need to develop a more robust conception of “shared governance” than has historically been the case. ... Even though faculty, administrators, and trustees will naturally view the institution through different lenses, they share an interest in the institution’s financial success and, even more, its vitality in achieving its mission. Achieving shared goals will require greater openness and more candid discussion among all parties than currently prevail.³

It is increasingly clear that a siloed view of divided authority is not sufficient to solve the complex issues facing higher education, such as challenges to our relevance, evolving student and faculty demographics, financial pressures, and technology changes at a mind-numbing pace. Faculty and administrative work is increasingly complex, and that work demands increased flexibility to take advantage of strategic opportunities, which may be out of sync with the traditional nine-month academic calendar. These complexities are accompanied by increased calls for inclusion and accountability from students who demand more influence over their educational experiences. Additionally, in a system of shared authority, who is responsible for improved institutional outcomes—learning outcomes, rankings, retention, career placement, and scholarly productivity, to name a few⁴?

Our models of shared governance also must evolve beyond faculty, senior administration, and trustees. Students and staff are key members of the community; their status should afford them some role in governance, and more importantly, they can contribute to resolving some of our complex, shared challenges. Our governance processes also must manage the delicate balance of competing priorities among constituent groups while valuing the perspectives that each

² <https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-government-colleges-and-universities>

³ A more modern view particularly focused on undergraduate education (pg. 67): https://www.amacad.org/multimedia/pdfs/publications/researchpapersmonographs/CFUE_Final-Report/Future-of-Undergraduate-Education.pdf

⁴ An AGB White Paper. Shared Governance: Changing with the Times. March 2017.

offers. In other words, how can we expand our practice of governance beyond the traditional three constituent groups and continue to ensure accountability and institutional outcomes?

Who Has Legal Authority at Trinity College?

All legal authority for Trinity College originates from its Charter and is vested in the Board of Trustees. According to the college's Charter: Trustees "have full power and authority to direct and manage the Funds for the benefit of the College, and also to prescribe and direct the course of study, and the discipline to be observed." Section 1 of the Statutes of the College states, "The Board of Trustees is, by the Charter of the College, the supreme governing power." Trustees select and appoint a president, professors, or tutors to "assist the President in the Government and education of the Students" and other officers (of the college). In recognition of the separation of authority, the Charter also provides that "no Professor, Tutor, or officer (other than the President) shall be eligible to serve as a Trustee."

The board delegates authority over the day-to-day operation to the president, who, in turn, may delegate authority over certain facets of the college management to others. As to faculty's self-governance, Title II, Section 2 of the Statutes notes, "The Faculty may delegate authority to committees of their own number appointed by themselves", and in Section 4, "The Faculty may make rules and by-laws for their own guidance and the administration of matters committed to their charge: provided such rules and by-laws do not conflict with the Charter or Statutes."

Though the ultimate legal authority for the college rests with the Board of Trustees, involving other constituents in planning and decisions is essential for a healthy, vital organization. The question is how to do so in a manner that fits Trinity's current needs and instills a sense of shared purpose and responsibility for the college's mission. This is a call to action.

The State of Shared Governance at Trinity and Proposed Next Steps

Here is my assessment of the state of shared governance at Trinity, based largely, but not solely, on input from the aforementioned shared governance focus groups. Trinity already exercises many best practices⁵ of shared governance. For example, we share a summary of decisions immediately after each Board of Trustees meeting, and the faculty invites the board chair (and most recently other members of the board) to speak annually at a faculty meeting; we schedule informal lunches between trustees and faculty members during most board meetings; and trustees meet with students during most board meetings. But there is more that we can and should do collectively.

The discussions with the trustee working group were freewheeling and included topics outside the scope of shared governance. Nevertheless, here I try to capture the essence of the comments, ask questions of clarification, and make suggestions to improve the understanding and execution of shared governance at Trinity and to move the discussion forward. Some of

⁵ A view from the Association of Governing Boards (AGB): <https://www.agb.org/trusteeship/2014/3/how-make-shared-governance-work-some-best-practices>

these suggestions could be put in place immediately, others have a longer trajectory for consideration and implementation, and all require constituent groups to engage in internal discussions followed by discussions across groups.

1. Problem: Lack of clarity about who makes what decisions and the scope of participation

Response: We need to develop a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each set of stakeholders (i.e., board, president, cabinet (senior administration), divisional leadership, governance committees, faculty members, staff members, and students); without it, we will continue to lack trust and tend toward defensiveness. Key questions include how we create clarity about the scope of participation for various stakeholders. Different constituent groups need to discuss their expectations, and we must come to a shared agreement about these roles. This is the hard work that I encourage us to undertake, independently and collectively, during 2018–19 academic year.

2. Problem: Using ad hoc committees rather than existing governance structures in planning and decision making

Response: Existing governance structures have been and are being used in many of our planning and decision-making processes. Administrators, faculty, staff, or students work together on the Planning and Budget Council (PBC) and the Curriculum Committee, among others. Often ad hoc committees are used when existing governance structures are not sufficiently broad to address the issues. For example, the Bicentennial Strategic Planning Commission and the Task Force on Preventing Sexual Misconduct were two recent ad hoc, multi-constituent committees, and even then, members of specific existing committees were invited based on their governance roles—the Student Government Association (SGA) president and self-selected members from the Exempt and Nonexempt Staff Councils (ESC and NESC) and the Faculty Conference were members of the Bicentennial Strategic Planning Commission. In addition, task forces and other ad hoc structures can provide valuable opportunities for constituents to work collaboratively outside of formal governance structures. Trust and transparency about the rationale for ad hoc structures and an agreement to work together in the spirit of sharing perspectives are necessary for these opportunities to be successful.

Trinity has a tradition of strong faculty governance; however, staff and student governance have been relatively weaker. This imbalance sometimes makes it challenging to use existing governance committees to address complicated issues that affect multiple constituencies, e.g., facilities and environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, we have missed opportunities in the past to align administrative work with existing faculty, student, and staff committees. I am committed to improving this practice in the future.

3. Problem: Lack of communication and transparency

Response: The administration will look to improve communication, including by requesting that division leaders take steps to communicate better with campus constituencies. We also will seek new venues that provide information in clearer, more digestible chunks than our lengthy letters. The Board of Trustees has a long history of meeting with students—first year students in the fall and seniors in the spring; these important practices should continue. Also, we recently instituted

luncheons with trustees, faculty, and administrators that take place during the board weekend. This practice should continue.

It also would be helpful to determine whether certain senior administrators should present more regularly at faculty and staff (see #6 below) meetings. Currently, there are not sufficient opportunities to hear about issues in the day-to-day management of the college before they become crises. Less formal and more frequent encounters among senior administrators, faculty, and staff are likely to instill an atmosphere of trust that supports better communication and transparency. We also should consider what other forms of communication, e.g. joint meetings, would build additional trust among constituents. Lastly, I would recommend that more substantive work occurs in governance committees and that updates about that work are shared regularly at faculty meetings.

4. Problem: Lack of clarity about the authority of the Faculty Manual

Response: This year, faculty members made good progress in revising parts of the *Faculty Manual*. However, questions remain about the authority of the document, which is voted on by faculty members but not regularly reviewed by administrators or trustees. I note that this is highly unusual among our peers and does not reflect best practices in higher education. It is worth clarifying what areas are in the faculty's purview and what areas are deeply intertwined with staff and student interests and have budgetary implications in which other constituents reasonably must be involved. Until the authority of the *Faculty Manual* is clearer and it is evident who has authority over which decisions, misunderstandings and distrust will continue.

5. Problem: Perception that strategic decisions are made by administrators without consultation with faculty and/or staff

Response: The perception that decisions are made without consultation is damaging to morale. Tackling the aforementioned issues should go a long way to addressing this perception. I would suggest that administrators at all levels make it a priority to clarify, through formal existing structures and informal dialogues, how decisions are shaped by their consultations with faculty, staff, and students. Improvements to #1 and #3 also should create a far better sense of trust and opportunities for meaningful exchanges and input.

6. Problem: Lack of a role for staff members and students in decision making

Response: Staff members often have been excluded from formal governance roles, despite their professionalism and commitment to the college. They need to have a seat at the table more regularly, and it is important to clarify their participatory role.

Also, I would recommend that staff members consider having periodic meetings during the year, similar to faculty meetings, where senior administrators attend. This may be an opportunity to improve communication among our more than 400 exempt and nonexempt employees. What would be the goals and expectations of such meetings? These are questions that ESC and NESC should consider in the coming academic year.

The role of SGA in campus governance also is not clear. Where and when are student voices heard, and how do their voices influence decisions? Is SGA representative of the broader student body as its demographics change? Also, there are concerns that students are not appointed in a timely fashion to campuswide committees, and when they are appointed, their attendance can be sporadic. In other words, there are questions about whether students are taking full advantage of the seats that they do have at discussion and decision tables.

7. Problem: Feeling of being in constant crisis

Response and Proposed Next Steps: We are not in a state of constant crisis. We have challenges, as do many of our peers and as does higher education more generally. We are making significant progress in moving toward the Summit and resolving our problems in this ever-changing environment. We can work together effectively to change this perception of constant crisis. Each of us can choose to actively intervene when discussions are getting heated; we can ask for information directly from sources who have information rather than escalate conversations with provocative questions on social media; we can ask leaders to ratchet down intensity and worry with open conversations about controversial topics. Can we agree to do so?

Next Steps and Conclusions

I agree with Gary Olson that “the key to genuine shared governance is broad and unending communication. When various groups of people are kept in the loop and understand what developments are occurring within the university, and when they are invited to participate as true partners, the institution prospers.”¹ I am committed to better communication and cultivating true partnerships among constituent groups. For this to happen, we need better governance structures to ensure that varied voices are heard in deliberations, even when a particular group has authority over a decision. More of our work needs to be done in governance committees, and when recommendations/decisions are shared more broadly, it should be done with an understanding that a variety of perspectives have been considered in the decisions.

My suggestion is that we engage in a multi-step process to continue our discussions of shared governance; the first two steps are outlined here. First, governance discussions should occur within constituent groups. Each group could consider three key questions:

- How do we ensure that our body is representative of the whole? In other words, how do we ensure that Faculty Conference and SGA represent the variety of faculty and student voices?
- What role should our group play in shared governance? Are we to be consulted, and are we deciders about certain issues? If we have authority over certain decisions, what responsibility and accountability do we hold?
- What key stakeholders (outside of our group) do we need to consult for input on particular issues?

Second, governance discussions should happen between and among groups. I would suggest that representative(s) from key constituent groups meet with the Board of Trustees Governance Committee at the February Board of Trustees meeting to share findings from their internal discussions and to consider next steps.

Please contact your elected/selected representatives to continue discussions of the questions posed in this document, and determine how you can participate in this process in the future. Faculty members should contact members of the Faculty Conference, staff members should contact members of ESC and NESC, and students should contact their elected SGA representatives. Make sure that your voice is heard.

We all have different and important roles to play in governance and in moving this extraordinary institution forward. Working together collaboratively and accepting shared responsibility for our future are essential to reach the Summit. I invite you to join the conversation.

With the hopes of stimulating greater communication, collaboration, and trust,
Joanne Berger-Sweeney, President